

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
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## INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

## IRAN: THE MEANING OF MOHARRAM

The Muslim month of mourning in Iran, Moharram (2-30 December), is likely to pose a critical test for the Shah and the military government. Moharram, the first month of the Islamic year, commemorates the death in the seventh century A.D. of one of Shia Islam's most revered founders. The emotion evoked yearly by that 1300-year-old event is unmatched in the Islamic world. In Iran the ceremonies connected with Moharram have often been used to express political opposition.

The Background

On October 1, 680 A.D. which was the first day of the month of Moharram and 46 years after the death of Mohammad, two Arab Moslem armies faced each other on the west bank of the Euphrates River at the plain called Kerbala south of present day Baghdad. The two forces were poorly matched. On the one side were 4,000 men of the forces of Yazid, Caliph of Islam in Damascus, and on the other some two hundred followers (in Arabic, Shia) of Hossein, grandson of Mohammad, who disputed Yazid's claim to be Caliph and considered himself the rightful successor of the Prophet.

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Hossein was surrounded and for ten days occasional skirmishes alternated with periods of negotiation. On the tenth day Yazid's forces opened an all-out attack and the battle went on until late in the afternoon. Finally, with all his followers dead, Hossein dashed into the midst of his enemies. The final blow was dealt by Shimar, according to Shia tradition, which also records that Hossein's body bore 23 spear wounds and thirty-four from swords. Hossein's head was cut off and his body trampled in the dust by Yazid's horsemen. The Shia believe that the head which was initially sent to Yazid, subsequently was returned to Kerbala and is buried there in Hossein's shrine.

This event - the Tragedy at Kerbala the Shiites call it - is at the center of the Moharram mourning period and for centuries the yearly re-enactment of the death of Hossein at the hands of Yazid (although he was not present) and Shimar has aroused intense emotion among all classes throughout the country. The occasion has often been used to voice veiled political comment, and a sermon by Ayatollah Khomeini in which he explicitly compared the Shah to the tyrant Yazid, was a major factor in the Ayatollah's exile.

#### The Ceremonies

The mourning ceremonies occur in several forms: recitations of the story of Hossein in the mosque combined with a sermon, recitations in private homes, dramatic presentations in public, and parades. Whatever the form the intention is always the same - to incite the participants to a frenzy of weeping and wailing through flagellations and beatings, and if these tears are mingled with blood, the participants gain even greater merit.

Descriptions of actual occurrences best give a feel for the occasion. In Tehran as many as 3,000 worshippers, mostly men, may be gathered in a large bazaar mosque. Around the mosque for many blocks crowds are gathered so tightly that movement is barely possible. Most of this crowd are paraders who are just forming up or who have ended a parade at the mosque.

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Inside the mosque several mullahs in succession preach sermons on the Hossein theme. As each speaker reaches the climax of the story, weeping and wailing increases. Finally, the main speaker begins. He starts with a sermon dwelling on the virtues and suffering of the family of Ali and then begins the chanting of the Hossein narrative. Again, as the story reaches its climax, the decapitation of Hossein, the weeping and groaning increases in volume and many begin to pound their foreheads and beat their chests. Finally, the sermon ends and the crowd begins to subside. Some may remain at the mosque all day listening to repetitions of the narrative, others may join one of the many parades which were being held and still others may go to other mosques or private homes for further commemoration ceremonies.

The public parades which go on throughout the first 10 days of Moharram are basically the same whether they occur in Tehran with thousands of participants or in a small village with only a dozen.

The parades are arranged by a group specifically organized for that purpose and usually represent a district, a neighborhood, or the members of a mosque. Often this group - called a dasteh - meets year-round, not only to plan for the ceremonies but also as a social-religious group that studies the Koran, listens to recitations of the Hossein story and discusses politics. A parade is often preceded by a meal sponsored by someone in the district to which are invited the members of the dasteh, prominent people and the poor. After the meal the leader of the dasteh begins chanting a lament in verse accompanied by rhythmical beating of the chest. The parade then moves outside and through the streets preceded and followed by black banners and stopping at each mosque or shrine in the area. This may go on all day and far into the night.

On Ashura, the tenth day of Moharram and the day on which Hossein and his family were murdered, the major ceremonies take place. The parades begin to form up at sunrise. The breast beating resumes and the parade moves through the

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streets to a central square where several dastehs may be gathered. All join in a final breast beating and then a mullah seated on a raised platform recites the Hossein story. Following this the symbols are brought out; black and green standards and the centerpiece, the nakhl. This is a sort of sedan chair but so large that 40 or 50 men may be required to carry it on their shoulders. It represents the vehicle in which Hossein and his relatives were carried to the final battle at Kerbala. The bearers enter the square at a trot, turning around on themselves twice as they enter. They circle the assembled dastes three times and then settle down on the fringes of the crowd. The combined dastes form themselves into large circles and under the leadership of a chanter in the center breast beating again begins and the whole circle moves one step to the right with each beat. Finally at a drum signal this part of the ceremony ends and the depiction on stage of the tragedy at Kerbala begins.

The drama which may go on for several hours recounts a story which is well-known to all those watching but it never fails to excite the most intense emotion. Although ashura is the peak of the month such performances, as well as other observances, continue for the whole month and may be repeated forty days after Ashura as well.

Moharram parades once were marked not only by beating the chest and forehead but also by flagellation and slashing with knives. These practices were suppressed by the government starting in 1928 but have occurred occasionally since then. Given the present state of religious tension it would not be surprising to see a resurgence of the more bloody aspects of the traditional celebration.

#### The Political Symbolism

Although the Moharram events deal with an occurrence 13 centuries old, they frequently have been used as a vehicle to attack whatever regime was in power, as well as to voice

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anti-foreign sentiments. Various Shahs of the previous dynasty were frequently attacked in this manner although they themselves sponsored and encouraged the Moharram celebrations.

The government of the day is easily equated in the popular mind with the government of Yazid and the whole body of Persian Shiites are seen as embodied in Hossein. Ayatollah Taleghani, currently one of the major National Front leaders, preached a Moharram sermon in 1963 just before the riots broke out at that time. He quoted a purported speech by the Imam Hossein in which Hossein urged the people to stand against an oppressive Shah by trying "to change him either with advice or if this is not possible, with power". From the phrasing and particularly the direct quote from Hossein in the present tense there was little doubt Taleghani was urging his audience to support the Shiite clergy against an oppressive government.

Although there are no current examples, the sermons being preached today and that will be preached during the month of Moharram are certainly following similar themes. It is likely, however, that some of them are even more explicit in calling for the Shah's downfall than has been the case in the past. Certainly, however the exhortation is phrased, many of the faithful will see themselves as warriors for Hossein against the tyrant.

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